

Fostering Resilient Children

March and April in Ohio can bring bitterly cold or beautifully warm days. The unpredictable and rapidly changing weather sometimes makes it difficult to believe that spring has arrived. But we can be assured that these months mark the beginning of spring and all the promise inherent in this season of renewal. The beauty of spring demonstrates the capacity of the earth to recover from even the most stressful winter. Without the promise of spring, we might presume that winter's damage is irrevocable. Nature's resilience is evident in every bud and flower that blooms in the spring. I can't help comparing that to the resilience of children and the role of parents in cultivating within their children a "resilient mindset."

When you Google the word "resilience" you discover a popular concept used to understand anything that can grow or decline – from companies to cities to agriculture. In engineering, it refers to the degree to which a structure returns to baseline state after being disturbed. Human resilience is the ability to deal effectively with stress, cope with everyday challenges, and rebound from disappointments and mistakes. For our children, this means developing the capacity to experience distress and return to a normal state of functioning.

The past twenty years produced a significant amount of research into the effects of adverse experiences on child development. This has been accompanied by research exploring how some children experience adversity and emerge remarkably strong. We have all heard stories about mythic heroes who endure terrible childhoods to become remarkably accomplished adults. Resiliency studies reveal a world full of everyday heroes – children who become "stress hardy." The research helps us broaden the concept of resilience to apply to all youth. According to Dr. Ann Masten (Professor of Child Psychology at the University of Minnesota), "Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities; but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children; in their families and relationships; and in their communities. The conclusion that resilience emerges from ordinary processes offers a far more optimistic outlook for action than the idea that rare and extraordinary processes are involved."

The skills of resilience are as important in enriching one's life as they are to recovering from setbacks. Dr. Robert Brooks, a leading expert in the field of youth resilience, finds that resilient children possess a certain "mindset." They feel special and appreciated. They have learned to set realistic goals and expectations for themselves. They believe they have the ability to solve problems and make sound decisions and are therefore, more likely to view mistakes and obstacles as challenges to confront rather than to avoid.

This leads to the conclusion that how parents help their children recover from distressing events matters more than their ability to protect them from all adversity. Just as winter prepares hearty plants for a fruitful summer, our children need to experience some level of distress to develop the capacity to recover. The next time your child is hurt or makes a mistake, use that opportunity to nurture their resiliency mindset. Remember the springtime - a time of annual natural renewal. Let it prompt you to cultivate the promise of resilience in your child.